Anne Conway’s Metaphysics of Love

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Anne Conway’s Metaphysics of Love by Eric Wayne Draper, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Philosophy at San Francisco State University.

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This thesis will examine the metaphysics of Anne Conway, concentrating specifically on the role that the historic Christ plays in the eventual moral perfection of the created world. Additionally, this thesis will examine the role that created substance plays in its own pursuit of moral perfection and whether or not this is an active or passive process. In addressing these subjects, I will, in large part, be engaging with ideas presented by Christia Mercer in her 2013 essay “Anne Conway’s Metaphysics of Sympathy.” It will be my purpose to argue against Mercer’s claim that “the key to Conway’s system lies in her re-interpretation of the Christian narrative about suffering,” and that, for Conway, “the improvement of both the world and its creatures depends on suffering.” In so doing, I will show that, for Conway, the improvement of both the world and its creatures depends not on suffering, but on love. Additionally, I will show that Mercer’s view, if taken to its logical conclusion, would entail that the eventual moral perfection of the created world was determined in the strictest sense of the word, and the fact that this interpretation is inconsistent with Conway’s view that individual modes of created substance “have the opportunity to attain, through their own efforts, ever greater perfection” (IX §6, Pg. 66).
Eric Wayne Draper
Preface and/or Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone in the philosophy department at San Francisco State University for the help and support that they have provided during my time as a student in the philosophy department. Additionally, I would like to thank Professor Alice Sowaal, Professor David Landy, Professor Justin Tiwald, and Professor Mohammad Azadpur for the help, support, and guidance that they have given me over the past five years.
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Introduction

For many years, Anne Conway has been considered, by most, to be a somewhat minor figure in the history of Western analytic philosophy. However, due to the recent scholarship of people like Sarah Hutton, Carol Wayne White, Jaqueline Broad, and a few other contemporary philosophers, there has been a resurgence of interest in Conway’s life and philosophy. Consequently, much has been written about Conway in the past few years that has helped contextualize her thought and has made a case for her inclusion in any discussion pertaining to the development of 17th century rationalism. However, although there have been some excellent articles written by some amazing scholars, it is my contention that Conway’s most important contribution to both 17th century rationalism and Christian theology, in general, has been left largely unexplained.

One of the contemporary philosophers who has done some incredible work on the philosophy of Conway is Christia Mercer. In her 2013 essay “Anne Conway’s Metaphysics of Sympathy,” Mercer attempts to excavate the basic components of Conway’s metaphysics, which she claims is more subtle and radical than has formerly been recognized. Mercer skillfully unpacks the multitude of ideas contained in Conway’s metaphysics eventually arguing for her claim that “the key to Conway’s system lies in her re-interpretation of the Christian narrative

1 See especially Hutton, Anne Conway, which offers a thorough account of the rich intellectual currents of Conway’s milieu; Broad, Women Philosophers; and White, The Legacy of Anne Conway. For interesting comparisons between Conway’s philosophy and that of others, see Hutton, “Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish and 17th Century Scientific Thought,” in Women, Science, and Medicine 1500-1700, and Feminist History in Philosophy, eds. Eileen O’Neil and Marcy Lascano, (Springer 2019).
about suffering” (2) and that, for Conway, “the improvement of both the world and its creatures depends on suffering” (2). And, while there is certainly some truth to this claim and a definite emphasis on suffering in the philosophy of Conway, it will be my purpose to engage with these ideas, as presented by Mercer, in an attempt to argue for a slightly different interpretation of Conway, one that is even more radical than Mercer claims.

Specifically, this paper will concentrate on how Mercer’s understanding of Conway’s re-interpretation of the traditional Christian narrative differs from my own interpretation, on Conway’s ideas concerning the purpose of the historic Christ’s life and message, and most importantly, on Conway’s ideas concerning created substance’s eventual moral perfection and whether or not this process is a passive one or one in which created substance plays an active role.

However, to fully appreciate the beauty and subtlety of Conway’s vision one must first understand a little more about Conway herself and the core of her metaphysics. So, to these ends, I will, beginning in section II, briefly discuss Conway’s history, specifically concentrating on her education, the sources that she drew inspiration from, and the philosophical problems that she was seeking to solve; I will, then, give a brief overview of Conway’s metaphysics in section III; in section IV, I will discuss the differences between Mercer’s interpretation of Conway’s re-imagining of the traditional Christian narrative and my own, ultimately arguing that Conway’s re-purposing of such a core tenet of Christianity is meant to show how, by remaining focused on the altruistic love of God and neighbor, one can not only overcome the suffering that is inherent in this world, but also be re-awakened to divine truths that were formerly inaccessible; and lastly,
in section V, I will describe how, if taken to their logical conclusions, my interpretation of Conway’s vision better captures the spirit and intent of Conway’s metaphysics than does Mercer’s.

**History**

As the prize pupil of the Cambridge Platonist, Henry Moore, Conway developed her philosophic views against the background of the Calvinistic scholasticism which prevailed throughout England at that time. In addition, and throughout the rest of her short life, she also studied many diverse sources such as Ancient Greek philosophy, Jewish mysticism, Quaker thought, and Origenism, just to name a few. It is against the backdrop of these unorthodox and varied belief systems, and in reaction to the negativity of English Calvinism, that Conway was able to cobble together what would later become her one and only published work, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*.

In a very real way, Conway was reacting to the perceived materialism of philosophers like Rene Descartes and Thomas Hobbes, and to the perceived pantheism of philosophers like Benedict Spinoza, and while she did agree with some aspects of the “new science” and the revolution in thought that this movement precipitated,\(^2\) she did not feel that any of the other

\(^2\) The scientific revolution of the “new science” was a series of events that marked the emergence of modern science during the early modern period, when developments in mathematics, physics, astronomy, biology, and chemistry transformed the views of society about nature.
rationalists, including her mentor Henry More, had been able to give a proper account of God, the created world, or the relationship of God to the created world. So, it was under the guise of solving these philosophical problems that Conway began her project in which she placed the love and goodness of God as the basis of all creation, and it was through her fascinating synthesis of Christian, Neoplatonic, Quaker, and Kabbalist influences that Conway was able to eventually reveal a picture of the world that was both universalist in nature and optimistic in tone.

Conway’s Metaphysics; An Overview

According to Conway, the entire universe is composed of the three distinct substances of God, the middle (or Christ) substance, and the created world. Each of these substances is “its own species,” and each substance has an essence that is distinct from the others. The essence of each individual substance is expressed in modes that are particular to that substance and each substance is defined, first and foremost, by its mutability. God is altogether immutable, the Christ substance is mutable but can only increase in perfection, and the created world is also mutable but can increase and/or decrease in perfection.

God, for Conway, is expressed as wisdom and will, and God’s essence is to be an eternal creator. God’s divine attributes include the usual things that one might find in a Supreme Being, things like goodness, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence, but God’s divine attributes also expand to include less familiar ones chosen from the diverse sources that Conway studied.
For example, Mercer points out that “there are four traditional Platonist assumptions that underlie (Conway’s) account of God’s essence and the relation that it bears to its products” (4).

How Mercer explains these are as follows: The **Supreme Being Assumption** maintains that God is perfect, self-sufficient, simple, and immutable, while the second Platonist assumption, **The Theory of Emanative Causation**, maintains that God emanates his communicable attributes, things like goodness, light, life, justice, and wisdom, to the Christ substance, who then emanates them to the rest of the created world in varying degrees (Mercer 4).

The final two Platonist assumptions underlying Conway’s philosophy are **The Principle of Plenitude**, which assumes that God fills the world with as many beings as possible and that they are unified with one another, and the **Theory of Sympathetic Harmony** which guarantees that each creature bears an enhancement relation to every other³ (Mercer 4). For Conway, because the world is filled with beings, it follows that it will also be filled with unity, self-sufficiency, and goodness, and according to Mercer, “For Platonists like Conway, the unity of oneness of God applies to the whole collection of created things: products of God will be interrelated in that each creature ‘loves’ all the others” (4).

For Conway, God and his attributes are the most secure objects of knowledge that we have, and even though Conway doesn’t present a formal argument for the existence of God, it is

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³ When two creatures are in an enhancement relation, an increase in goodness of one will promote an increase in the goodness of another, although the relation is non-reciprocal (that is, the increase in the second will not then promote an additional increase back to the first).
upon the bedrock of this first principle, that “God is spirit, life and light, infinite… the creator of all things” (I §1, Pg. 9), that Conway builds her entire metaphysical system.

The Christ substance, according to Conway, is the necessary intermediary between God and the created world, and, in many ways, it is the engine that drives Conway’s entire system. The Christ substance not only makes it possible for God to be “intimately present” in all of creation and yet still maintain divine transcendence, but also, according to Conway, it is only through the Christ substance that God and his attributes can be directly known (IV §2, Pg. 22). According to Conway, the Christ substance “is necessary by the very nature of things because otherwise a gap would remain and one extreme would have been united with the other extreme without a mediator” (V §3, Pg. 25), which, according to Conway, is impossible and “against the nature of things which is apparent throughout the entire universe” (V §3, Pg. 25).

The third substance in Conway’s hierarchy of being is the created world, which is characterized by its mutability and temporality. According to Conway, the created world is endowed with an essential vitality that guarantees that all of created substance, from the most inanimate object to the most animate, is alive and shares in God’s communicable attributes. This vitality makes up the created world’s essence and is “expressed in the rich variety of individual creatures whose modes constitute the diversity of the created world” (Mercer 1).

Conway rejects Descartes’ insistence that humans consist of both minds and bodies, arguing instead for a *monistic* theory of created substance in which there is no essential difference between spirit and body. According to Conway, “body is nothing but fixed and condensed spirit; and spirit is nothing, but volatile body or body made subtle” (VII §4, Pg. 61).
Although Conway’s substance monism, as it pertains to the created world, shows similarities with Spinoza’s nature in which every being is a manifestation or mode of the same substance, unlike Spinoza, Conway insists on God’s maintaining divine transcendence.

According to Conway, the infinity of God entails that the created world is also infinite, and that created substance is infinitely divisible and created in an infinity of ways (III §6 Pg. 17). If the world were to lack such infinities, “its paltry and unseemly scale” would not express the “great majesty of God” (III §6 Pg. 17). Additionally, the divinity has made each creature stand in unified harmony with all others, a unity that Conway conceives of in terms of universal sympathy, which, according to her, has “the very greatest use for understanding the causes and reasons of things and for understanding how all creatures… are inseparably united one to another.” (III §10 Pg. 20).

This monism, in regard to created substance, entails a continuum that exists between the different modes who, manifested as individual creatures, travel up and down a scale of being that exists between corporeality, or imperfection, on one end of the spectrum and spirituality, or perfection, on the other. And, although there are some thorny and rich philosophical issues in Conway’s discussion of monism vs. dualism, the core of my project lies elsewhere. I raise these

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4 Conway held to the Platonist doctrine of Universal Sympathy which is the view that the unity and oneness of God emanates to the whole of creation and creates a harmony among all of creation so that all creatures are united together in an enhancement relationship such that the moral betterment of one leads to the moral betterment of the whole.
issues simply because I think that it is important that the reader get a basic overview of Conway’s metaphysics – according to Conway:

Creation is one entity or substance in respect to its nature or essence so that it only varies according to its modes of existence, one of which is corporeality. There are many degrees of this so that any thing can approach or recede more or less from the condition of a body or spirit. (VII §1. Pg. 41-42).

This also helps to explain why Conway insists that God would not make any dead thing, because “since dead matter does not share any of the communicable attributes of God, it would have to then be complete non-being,” which, according to Conway, is “a vain fiction and Chimera, an impossible thing” (VII §2, Pg. 46). In short, according to Conway, all modes of created substance, even the finest grains of sand, have some features of motion, impenetrability, life, sense, and knowledge. Body and spirit are not two distinct substances, but rather two “principles” (one more active and one more passive) within the continuum of ways that created substance exists.

By positing this notion of God and the world, Conway also makes possible the transformation of any created being into any other without jeopardizing divine immutability. She explains:

If a creature were entirely limited by its own individuality and totally constrained and confined within the very narrow boundaries of its own species to the point that there was no mediator though which one creature could change into another, then no creature could attain further perfection and greater participation in divine goodness (VI §5, Pg. 33).
This transmutation of species, which most scholars agree is a Kabbalist notion, is at the core of Conway’s metaphysics, and it is through the system of gradations inherent in her hierarchy of being that one really sees God’s eternal love and justice in action; in fact, the punishment and remuneration that exists as an integral part of this transmutation of species is a tangible manifestation of God’s eternal love and justice, it is designed as part of the fabric of the universe, and, as such, it guarantees that the created world will eventually achieve moral perfection. As creatures perfect over time this transmutation of species, along with the enhancement relation that is an integral part of the sympathetic harmony that exists between finite modes in created substance, work together to aid in creaturely perfection. This transmutation of species doctrine will play an important role in Mercer’s view concerning the eventual moral perfection of created substance that is discussed in the next section.

Conway’s Re-imagining of the Traditional Christian Narrative: Mercer’s Interpretation vs. My Own

In Conway’s re-imagining of the traditional Christian narrative, the difference between the Christ substance and the historic Christ can sometimes be difficult to understand. This is because, for Conway, there is a rational distinction that exists between these two aspects of Christ, and consequently, Christ can be regarded in either one of these two very different ways. And, while Mercer and I both agree that Conway’s re-imagining of the traditional Christian narrative plays a central role in her philosophy, and we agree on the role of the Christ substance in Conway’s system, we differ on our interpretation of the role that the historic Christ plays.
According to my interpretation, Conway’s re-imagining is driven by her notion of Christ and Christ’s role as both the Christ substance, which is the divine mediator between God and the rest of the created world, and the historic Christ who is the living embodiment of God’s message of selfless love. For Mercer, the historic Christ plays a slightly different role, one which will be discussed in detail later in this section.

Although highly unorthodox, it is Conway’s re-purposing of such a foundational Christian teaching that ends up giving her metaphysics its real power. Conway gives the Christ substance features that, in traditional Christian theology, would be attributed to the historic Christ. For instance, immortality, the eventual moral perfection of the created world, and sympathetic harmony are all features of the universe that, the Christ substance, in keeping with the Supreme Being Assumption and the Theory of Emanative Causation, both causes and is itself caused by emanation from and through God.

The Christ substance, for Conway, acts as a direct metaphysical conduit between God and the created world, and as such, it functions much like Henry More’s Boniform Faculty. It is a spark of the divine that is available to all of created substance. In essence, it allows created substance to tap into the mind of God such that, over many lifetimes, individual modes of created substance, driven by their own striving and assisted by the principle of sympathetic harmony and the punishment and remuneration inherent in the transmutation of species, make progress toward their own eventual moral perfection.

In Conway’s version of the Christian narrative, Mercer and I also both agree that the historic Christ is no more divine than any other mode of created substance, and as Mercer notes
“All creatures exist eternally and did so before the historic Christ arrived on the scene” (9). However, in my interpretation of Conway’s version of the Christian narrative, what differentiates the historic Christ from the rest of us is the fact that the historic Christ, born fully perfected with access to all of God’s divine attributes, understood his role in the world and the fact that, by remaining focused on the selfless love of God and neighbor even through tremendous suffering, he would act as a moral ideal to all those who came after. In Mercer’s version, the life, death, and subsequent resurrection of the historic Christ is special because “it brings attention to the eternity of souls and to the place of suffering in human life” (9).

All creatures are like the historic Christ in that they are modes of created substance, and all creatures are like the historic Christ in the fact that they live eternally. It is the Christ substance, not the historic one, that renders creatures eternal. In fact, Conway describes the Christ substance as a “most powerful and efficacious balm, through which all things are preserved” (V §6, Pg. 26). So, the historic Christ does not change things in any fundamental way, but, according to my interpretation of Conway, he does provide a pathway by which created substance, in emulating his life and actions, can significantly increase the rate of their own moral perfection.

According to Conway the Christ substance is “called logos ousios, or the essential word of the father,” while the historic Christ, as well as the created world’s eventual attainment of moral perfection, makes up the logos proforikos, or “the word which is uttered and revealed” (IV
As the logos ousios, the Christ substance manifests the will of God in the world one part of which is the historic Christ, who, through his life and actions as recorded in the gospels, acts as an inspiration, not only in his ability to endure suffering (as Mercer contends), but more importantly in the way that he lived, as an exemplar, the carrier of God’s divine message of selfless love to all of creation. In a very real sense, Christ as logos ousios is God’s eternal plan, and the logos proforikos is God’s plan manifested in the world.

The idea of being inseparably united to one another is at the core of the historic Christ’s life and teaching in the same way that, I believe, it is a core tenet in Conway’s metaphysics, and, according to my view, just as the historic Christ demonstrated this divine truth in the world, the Christ substance communicates this truth to each and every mode of created substance as they increase in moral perfection and cognitive ability. Mercer believes that the main significance of the historic Christ rests in “the moral significance of his suffering,” and his ability to inspire others to “endure their own hardships.” (9)

However, here Mercer misses a key point in Conway’s metaphysics. Mercer does not take into consideration Conway’s view concerning the role that the historic Christ’s love of God and neighbor has nor does she consider the fact that the main significance of the historic Christ rests in his being an exemplar who, through the example he sets by his life and teachings, shows that even through suffering one can remain singly focused on the altruistic love of God and

5 The metaphysical notion of logos has a long and varied history, but suffice it to say, that one of the most prominent uses of the term is that of word or story where the view is that the created world manifests a divinely ordained story (Mercer 7).
neighbor and the fact that, ultimately, we will be awakened to the metaphysical truth that we are all essentially the same, united in our suffering, all small parts of the greater whole that is the created world - a view which I will discuss, in detail, in the sections that follow.

To better understand the important teachings of the historic Christ concerning the love of God and neighbor, we should first look to Christ’s own words, and to those of his followers as recorded in the New Testament. In the gospel of Luke, the historic Christ first teaches: “You shall love… your neighbor as yourself,” offering up the parable of the “Good Samaritan” as an example of love and compassion for all peoples, including one’s enemies (New Testament, KJV, Luke 10: 30-34), and in Romans chapter thirteen, St. Paul explains:

Thou shall not commit adultery, Thou shall not kill, Thou shall not steal, Thou shall not bear false witness, Thou shall not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself (New Testament, KJV, Romans 13:9).

So, over and over again we see in the New Testament that the multitude of laws contained in the Hebrew Bible can be summed up simply as “Love God above all others and love your neighbor as you love yourself” (New Testament, Matthew 22:37-39, Mark 12:30-31, Romans 13:8-10, Luke 6:27, etc.). This is the simple message that the historic Christ’s birth, life, and death was meant to teach, and it is the same message that, I believe, Conway’s metaphysics of love seeks to embody. Yes, there is suffering, but it is our ability to transcend the suffering of this world while continuing to love God and neighbor that marks our ability to increase the rate of our own moral perfection and in so doing, increase the moral perfection of all created substance.
Another passage that is related in the New Testament is in the Gospel of John, chapter 14, where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the light, no man cometh unto the father but by me” (New Testament, KJV, John 14:6). In traditional English Calvinism this is interpreted to say that the only way to eternal salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ and the belief that by his death and subsequent resurrection, he has offered humanity its only path to overcoming original sin and attaining salvation.

But another way to interpret this passage is to understand Christ, and our relation to Christ, as Conway describes – Christ as the divine mediator who provides creatures their only path to true knowledge of God, true knowledge of the world, and access to God’s divine attributes. However, the path is not one of recognition and worship (Calvinistic view), nor is it one in which we endure suffering and are somehow magically made better as a result (Mercer’s interpretation of Conway). Rather, according to my view, Conway holds that we, guided by the life and teachings of the historic Christ and the urgings of our inner light, aspire to live as the historic Christ lived, with a love for all beings even while enduring the suffering that is an inherent part of the world.

This is the interpretation that I believe Conway is arguing for in the Principles when she notes that “such a mediator is necessary by the very nature of things” (V §3, Pg. 25) because “since he is the true mediator between God and his creatures, it follows that since he exists among them, that he raises them by his action to union with God” (V §4, Pg. 26). I believe that the action that Conway is referring to here is the historic Christ’s ability to live, at all times, with the love of God and neighbor as his focus, and as we emulate the historic Christ’s ability to live
this way as a moral ideal, we too are lifted by our action to a closer union with God. And, due to
the enhancement relation that is an inherent part of sympathetic harmony, when we are lifted by
our action to a closer union with God, the entirety of created substance is also lifted to a closer
union with God.

Both Mercer and I agree that Conway’s re-imagining of the traditional Christian narrative
is the single most important aspect of Conway’s unique vision. We also agree that Conway
makes this philosophical move, in part, in an attempt to appeal to both Christians and non-
Christians. However, for Mercer, “the key to Conway’s system lies in her re-imagining of the
Christian narrative about suffering” and is driven by the notion that “all creatures are like Christ
in suffering for the good of the world” (3), and while this is true to a certain extent, I don’t
believe that Mercer accurately characterizes Conway’s interpretation of the role of the historic
Christ in the process of creaturely perfection, nor do I believe that Mercer accurately
characterizes the role of suffering in the eventual moral perfection of the created world. What
Mercer is missing is the metaphysics of love that is so important in both the historic Christ’s
message and in created substance’s striving.

After all, it is one thing to say that the historic Christ, by suffering, made the world better,
and that creatures, by looking to the example set by the historic Christ, can also endure suffering,
one of the results of which is that they help to make the world better. But, that still doesn’t
explain how suffering in and of itself makes the world better. Is suffering both a necessary and
sufficient condition in making the world better, or is it simply necessary? Mercer seems to think
that suffering is necessary and sufficient, she explains:
The sole difference between (the historic Christ) and other creatures is the moral values implied by his life, death, and resurrection... He suffers, but so do they. His distinctiveness rests entirely in the attention paid to his life, passions, and resurrection. Unlike other creatures that suffer, die, and live eternally, his life and sufferings have a special moral prominence. When all is said and done, the historic Christ is different from other creatures because, in suffering as terribly as he did and in recognizing his suffering as part of the order of things, he becomes an inspiration to others (Pg. 8-9).

I wholeheartedly agree that part of Conway’s re-imagining of the traditional Christian narrative encompasses creatures looking to the historic Christ as a moral ideal. But is it the historic Christ’s ability to endure suffering that is meant to inspire, or is it something more than that?

My contention is that there is more to making the world better than the ability to endure suffering, and there is more to the idea of the historic Christ as a moral ideal than the fact that he was able to endure suffering. Sure, the historic Christ endured suffering. In fact, the historic Christ endured some of the worst suffering that anyone could possibly imagine. He was betrayed by one of his closest friends, sentenced to death, forced to endure savage beatings, belittled, spat upon, and forced to wear a crown of thorns as he marched, carrying his own cross, to his execution site. He was ridiculed, nailed to the cross, and finally killed after two or three days of suffering in agonizing pain. However, even unto the very end the historic Christ begged God to “forgive them father for they know not what they do” (New Testament, KJV, Luke 23:34).

So, yes, the historic Christ suffered terribly, but what is important here is that fact that even as he endured unimaginable suffering, he stayed true to his one simple message, “love God above all others and love your neighbor as you love yourself” (New Testament, KJV, Matthew
This, to me, is the most significant aspect of the historic Christ’s suffering, and this is the moral lesson that the historic Christ’s suffering is meant to teach. After all, if the historic Christ can stay true to the altruistic love of God and neighbor even under these conditions, then how can we not aspire to do the same. When we are able to remain focused on altruistic love even through suffering, we, too, can bring divine love into the world, and when we are able to bring divine love into the world, all of created substance benefits.

Suffering, for Conway, is important, but it is only part of the equation. What is really important in the re-imagining of the traditional Christian narrative, for Conway, is the moral lesson that it teaches us. Suffering is part of what it means to be human, and the historic Christ, who was born fully perfected with access to all of God’s divine attributes, knew this to be the case. However, what is really meaningful about the historic Christ’s life and message is that although he suffered, he demonstrated that it was possible to transcend suffering through altruistic love, and that by accepting suffering as an integral part of what it means to be human and yet still love, we can transcend suffering itself.

**Long-Term Implications of Both Views**

Now that I have given a brief overview of Conway’s metaphysics, and I have discussed how Mercer’s interpretation of Conway’s re-imagining of the traditional Christian narrative differs from my own interpretation, it is time to consider the implications of both views and how they do or do not coincide with Conway’s overall vision in the *Principles*. As stated earlier, there
is a lot that Mercer and I agree on. We both agree that Conway’s re-imagining of the traditional Christian narrative is the single most important aspect in her philosophy, and that Conway’s highly original rendering of the Christian story is used, in part, as a tool to appeal to both Christians and non-Christians.

Additionally, we both agree that, according to Conway, the historic Christ is no more divine than any other mode of created substance. In fact, the only difference, for Conway, between the historic Christ and any other mode of created substance is that the historic Christ was born fully perfected with a complete understanding of his purpose and role in the logos proforikos (God’s plan). Mercer and I also agree that, since the historic Christ is no more divine than you or me, it is the Christ substance that “imbues the created world with significant normative properties, properties which constitute the created world’s unifying moral force” (Mercer 6). In short, it is the Christ substance, not the historic Christ, that renders created substance immortal, and it is the Christ substance that, in keeping with the Supreme Being Assumption and the Theory of Emanative Causation, fashions the created world such that there is a sympathetic harmony and an enhancement relation that exists amongst all created substance.

Conway is very clear that “whatever is correctly understood is most true and certain,” and the fact that “the precepts of truth (are) innate ideas which all men find in themselves” (VI §2 Pg. 29). Conway also makes it abundantly clear, in the very first chapters of the Principles, that she “doesn’t take Christianity to be a necessary or sufficient condition for knowledge about God” (Mercer 6), claiming instead that everyone, regardless of their religious perspectives, can obtain knowledge of the attributes of God. Conway insists that “Jews, Turks, and other people” can all
grasp these attributes, and this is why, in her attempt to appeal to Christians and non-Christians alike, Conway re-invents the Christian narrative and, in my interpretation, places its focus squarely on redemption through the altruistic love of God and neighbor. “Conway seems genuinely hopeful that readers of her book, regardless of religious affiliation, will discover its truth and in so doing, make the world better” (Mercer 3).

With all of that being said, there are still two very important points that Mercer and I do not agree upon. First of all, we do not agree on the nature of the historic Christ’s role in the logos proforikos, and, secondly, we do not agree on what the role is that created substance plays in its own pursuit of moral perfection. If Mercer’s interpretation is correct, her view depends on a determinism such that the eventual perfection of the created world relies entirely on a combination of the principle of punishment and remuneration that is inherent in the transmutation of species and the enhancement relation that exists as an integral part of the sympathetic harmony amongst created substance. In other words, each finite mode of created substance is moving towards eventual perfection, but the entire process is determined in the strictest sense.

Conway absolutely believes that the created world is fated, by God, to eventually achieve moral perfection; however, I think that it is very important to stress the agency that is inherent in Conway’s view. She is very clear that created substance has the ability to attain, through its own efforts, greater perfection, and, as such, she could not possibly hold to the strict determinism that Mercer’s view implies. Conway explains:
Creatures have the opportunity to attain, through their own efforts, ever greater perfection as instruments of divine wisdom, goodness, and power, which operate in them and with them. For in this the creatures enjoy greater pleasure since they possess what they have as the fruits of their own labor (IX §6, Pg. 66)

Additionally, In the introduction to the *Principles*, Allison P. Coudert notes that, according to Conway, “God has created matter with the innate capacity to reach perfection through its own effort” (XXI), and that Conway’s “kabbalistic philosophy led her to the optimistic belief that man possessed the ability to save himself” (XXI). So, it is obvious that, for Conway, created substance has the ability to increase the rate of its own moral perfection. This means that, *in addition* to the punishment and remuneration inherent in the transmutation of species and the enhancement relation that exists as a part of sympathetic harmony, created substance has the ability to increase in perfection *as a result of its own efforts*. In other words, created substance has agency.

So, the principle of punishment and remuneration plays a role in creaturely perfection, but it does not have the significance that Mercer’s interpretation implies. According to Conway, the attributes that define matter are sensitivity, knowledge, and *the capacity to improve*, and God is good, just, and merciful *precisely because* he has created matter with the innate ability to reach perfection through its own efforts (Coudert xxi). According to Conway, it is the responsibility of each and every mode of created substance to strive to learn the true nature of things so that they may more clearly follow the urgings of their inner light as they seek divine truth. And, when created substance is able to practice the love God and neighbor, even through suffering, they bring more of the love of God into the world. This is what is important about Conway’s metaphysics of love, and this is what Mercer is missing.
Consequently, enduring suffering, in and of itself, cannot possibly be the only aspect involved in making the world better. Because if that were the case, then the process of perfecting would be an entirely passive one, and that just doesn’t make sense in light of Conway’s otherwise optimistic and empowering view of created substance’s striving.

In chapter VII of the Principles Conway notes that all created substance, when it perfects, will be “freed from the confusion and vanity to which it is subjected on account of sin” (VII §1, Pg. 41). So, the illusion that we are all separate and the vanity that accompanies such a view, for Conway, is a direct result of the Great Fall\(^6\), and as we perfect and increase in cognitive ability we reawaken to the reality that we are all united and the fact that love of neighbor is essentially love of self. This obviously does not happen overnight, in fact, according to Conway, it “require(s) long periods of time for (its) consummation” (IX §6 Pg. 66).

So, what is most important, for Conway, is that created substance reawaken to the divine truths that are “written in every human heart,” and, in so doing, they reawaken to divine truths that were formerly inaccessible or, at the very least, extremely confused and obscured. It just doesn’t make sense to think that we are all just passive participants in our own moral perfection. If this were the case, then what would be the importance of seeking truth and why would Conway make the seeking of truth such an integral part of created substance’s striving.

\(^6\) According to wikipedia.org, the Great Fall is a term used in Christianity to describe the transition of man from a state of innocence, integrity, sanctifying grace, and infused knowledge to one in which humanity became subject to ignorance, suffering, and the dominion of death.
By looking to the example set by the historic Christ’s birth, life, and death, individual creatures learn that by remaining singly focused on the altruistic love of God and neighbor they can increase in perfection and cognitive ability. As they begin to embrace this as a way of life, they begin to be able to access that spark of the divine that exists within each of them more and more successfully. In essence, they begin to be able to tap into the mind of God such that their once confused and obscured perceptions become clearer and more distinct. And, as they begin to practice love of God and neighbor more and more perfectly, truths that were once inaccessible to them begin to become more and more available. They begin to understand the fact that they are all “one in virtue of their primary substance or essence” (VII §3, Pg. 47), and that, as such, they truly are “of one mind” (VII §3, Pg. 46). Additionally, created substance begins to understand, more clearly, its role in the logos proforikos, and its responsibility to, like the historic Christ, share these truths with the rest of the created world.

I believe that this is the reason for Conway’s emphasis on altruistic love in the *Principles*. After all, most 17th century rationalists discuss the utility of this type of love, but more than any other, Conway endorses this type of selfless love as absolutely necessary and the central component in the created world’s striving. According to Conway, “there is a universal love in all creatures for each other… (that) surely follow(s) from the same basic principle that all things are one” (VII §3, Pg. 47), and according to Patrick Frierson, in his essay “A Metaphysical Basis for Love: Descartes, Spinoza, and Conway on the Metaphysics of Love,” “If we literally are just parts of a single substance – the created universe – then loving others as fellow parts of a whole of which one is also a part is just conforming one’s love to the metaphysical truth” (12). So, since it is the nature of every creature to be always in motion, growing and progressing infinitely
toward greater perfection” (VII §2, Pg. 46), it only makes sense that, as created substance perfects and improves in cognitive ability, it becomes more and more aware of its true nature and the fact that, through love, all is possible.

Conclusions

At the end of the day, Mercer and I agree on a lot, but, unfortunately, we disagree on what is, in my opinion, the most important element in Conway’s metaphysics. Mercer’s central claim that “the key to Conway’s system lies in her re-interpretation of the Christian narrative about suffering” misses the very important issue of metaphysical love and its place in both the historic Christ’s life and message and in created substance’s striving to achieve moral perfection. And, if we carry Mercer’s view to its logical conclusion, we are left with a process of creaturely perfection that is determined in the strictest sense of the word. In other words, according to Mercer’s view, creatures are but passive participants in their own moral perfection and this just doesn’t make sense in light of Conway’s otherwise optimistic and inclusive view.

Conway’s metaphysics of love gives us a very progressive vision of Christianity that, when one considers the time and place in which it was created, is quite extraordinary. Her re-imagining of the Christian narrative is truly visionary simply because she asks us to look to the historic Christ, not as a God to be worshipped or a scapegoat to deliver humanity from original sin, but as an exemplar who, born fully perfected with access to all of God’s divine attributes, taught one simple message “Love God above all others and love your neighbor as you love
yourself.” Conway argues that if we can look to the historic Christ in this way and emulate his devotion to selfless love, we can significantly increase the rate of our own moral perfection, and due to the enhancement relation that is part of the fabric of the universe, when we bring divine love into the world and increase in moral perfection, all of created substance also increases in moral perfection.

These progressive elements of Christian Theology that have much less to do with a literal interpretation of the bible and much more to do with trying to create a more inclusive and optimistic vision of God and God’s love for the world are all contained in Conway’s vision. In fact, many of the ideas in her philosophical theology contain the seeds of what would eventually come to fruition with the advent of movements like Process Christianity and The New Thought. These progressive Christian sects, and others like them, owe a debt of gratitude to Conway and others like her. Perhaps as we explore new ways of imagining the philosophical canon, we might consider the philosophy of Anne Conway as an example of early progressive Christian Theology, and how Conway, in many ways, foreshadows philosophies and theologies to come – belief systems that fostered optimism and a common belief in man’s inherent ability to save himself and the world.
Works Cited


